

We're pastors. The fight against Maga Christianity starts locally

Doug Pagitt and Lori Walke

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Trump's movement has used the Christian faith to fuel oppression. Here's how we are standing against it



As faith leaders, our greatest strength during Trump 2.0 and the rise of Christian nationalism is our local congregations.' Photograph: Olga Fedorova/EPA

Donald Trump wants us to believe that the “war on Christianity” is spreading across the globe. The US president recently sounded the alarm on the “[mass slaughter](#)” of Christians in Nigeria while threatening a [US invasion](#) of the African nation. We shouldn't be surprised. This falls right in line with Trump's ongoing attempts to project Maga Christianity on to the global stage and crack down on religious freedom.

Maga Christianity represents a self-serving, commercialized version of the Christian faith - putting power over service and empathy - and it is everywhere in our federal government. In February, Trump announced a taskforce led by Pam Bondi with the [goal of rooting out “anti-Christian” bias](#). In September, Trump announced his plans to [protect prayer in schools](#). Later that month, he issued a memorandum [identifying anti-Christianity as a potential driver of terrorism](#). These are not just one-off incidents. This is a national effort to push the Maga Christianity agenda on Americans, and we're already seeing the consequences.

Despite the Bible's clear call to “love thy neighbor”, the Maga movement has used its version of the Christian faith to oppress immigrants, oppose the rights of women and condemn the LGBTQ+ community. At the same time, we've seen [shootings at places of worship](#) and [arrests of faith leaders](#) at peaceful protests.

As faith leaders, our greatest strength during Trump 2.0 and the rise of Christian nationalism is our local congregations. It's our ability to physically come together in our communities, communicate with one another, support our neighbors in need and elevate our own Christian values that set us apart.

Faith leaders have a powerful role to play, especially as the Trump administration continues to use religion to divide us.

In Oklahoma City and Minneapolis, we have been working with our congregations to uplift our own visions of the Christian faith and mobilize our communities from within - and we're making progress.

In Oklahoma City, these efforts date back to 2017, when the first Trump administration issued the Muslim ban and Islamophobia soared throughout the country. In response, a small group of faith leaders and community members, led in part by the pastor Lori Walke, began to meet regularly to see how they could join the sanctuary movement. With the understanding that there's no clear to-do list when joining a resistance, the group dove headfirst into action and started a weekly vigil to support local immigrants.

Over the years, the vigil took place through the rain, snow and sleet, and changed locations from outside churches to in front of ICE agencies and the US Citizenship and Immigration Services office so participants could accompany undocumented people to their appointments.

This year, with the resurgence of attacks on immigrants, the group has reignited our weekly vigils and started immigrant-justice training sessions to educate community members on everything from what ICE is, what warrants look like and the rights of observers to the rights of people being detained and how community members can support them.

These vigils and training sessions aren't just building hope; they're making real change. Individuals and families now have relationships with pastors and church members who are accompanying them to immigration hearings,

assisting with paperwork and providing moral, spiritual and financial support. Vigils have translated into rapid response trainings in local congregations, equipping communities to offer more effective support of their immigrant neighbors. Earlier in November, they also organized a letter-writing campaign and hand-delivered more than 500 messages to the Oklahoma governor, Kevin Stitt, and the senator James Lankford urging them to protect immigrant neighbors.

In Minneapolis, following the shooting at Annunciation church that killed two children and injured more than 20 others, Pastor Doug Pagitt's organization Vote Common Good worked hand-in-hand with Moms Demand Action and a broader faith-led coalition to demand the state ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. The group brought these demands directly to the door of the Minnesota governor, Tim Walz, **who recently announced** he'd be holding a series of town halls to speak with his constituents about gun violence and the impact on children and families across the state. In Chicago, despite the presence of the national guard, **faith leaders have continued to protest** and stand their ground. In Florida, the **faith community has been outside "Alligator Alcatraz"** for weeks on end, demanding its closure.

Progress is not linear, and securing rights for immigrants and protections against gun violence will not come easily. But local actions will be a driving force that leads to change.

Across the country, faith leaders and their communities are showing up in droves to stand up for their beliefs and push back against the hateful and divisive rhetoric that is a core emblem of **Maga Christianity**. Faith leaders and congregations are taking important steps to fight back and support our neighbors, and we need others to continue to join us to promote our good Christian values and put love before hate.

What's giving us hope now

In Oklahoma, a state that consistently ranks in the bottom 10% of just about everything in which Americans want to “be best”, glimmers of hope can be seen in Voices Organized in Civic Engagement (Voice) OKC, a broad-based organizing coalition primarily made up of faith communities that range from Roman Catholic to United Church of Christ. Voice OKC is in the middle of its 1,000 Conversation campaign, an effort to strengthen relationships among member institutions, more deeply understand the pressures facing families in our communities and organize those who are willing to act together to build relational power. Voice's commitment to finding common ground at the parish level through stories of shared experience and shared values is a model for finding our way forward as a nation. It's not time to grow weary in working for good.

- Doug Pagitt is executive director of Vote Common Good. The Rev Lori Walke is the senior minister at Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ in Oklahoma City

AMEN TO THIS

This Is What Actual Christianity Is Supposed to Sound Like

A stirring sermon from an Episcopalian pulpit last Sunday about “faith, basic morality, and decency” that we thought was worth reprinting



SCREEN GRAB VIA YOUTUBE/ST. THOMAS À BECKET EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Reverend Michael Delk of St. Thomas à Becket Episcopal Church in Morgantown, West Virginia

Michael Delk /

February 6, 2026

Last weekend, I went to my hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia, and I attended Sunday morning services at my mother's old church, St. Thomas à Becket Episcopal Church. I hadn't visited in a few years, and the pastor, Michael Delk, was new to me. I found his sermon to be extraordinarily moving, the way he tied the tragic events we're witnessing in this country to Scripture and advanced a notion of "Christian integrity" so dramatically different from the one placed before us by most of the so-called "Christians" who dominate our discourse. And it's reassuring to ponder that if these words were being preached in Morgantown last Sunday, then surely words like them were and are issuing from pulpits across the country.

—TNR editor Michael Tomasky



They were both 37 years old, murdered by federal agents in Minneapolis, less than three weeks apart. On January 7, Renee Good was sitting in her car when she was shot three times, including once in the head. On January 24, Alex Pretti was filming federal agents with his cell phone, exercising his First Amendment right to protest their presence peacefully. They shoved him to the ground and several of them beat him. An agent removed a handgun from Alex's waistband, which he carried legally, and a few seconds after *disarming* him, 10 shots were fired in five seconds into his prone body on the ground.

Senior administration officials quickly labeled both Renee and Alex "domestic terrorists," claiming that federal agents were defending their lives. Go watch the

videos online. Alex never drew his weapon. Renee was unarmed, moving her vehicle very slowly. Once shot, agents did not attempt to stop their bleeding or resuscitate them. Administration officials swiftly declared the shootings “justified,” without even investigating them; didn’t start investigating until public outcry proved too much. You can find plenty of videos online of peaceful protesters being shoved to the ground or beaten by a mob of agents or pepper-sprayed in the face.

There’s a pattern building here of arbitrary and gratuitous violence, of lies and cover-ups.

“Equal under the law” apparently no longer applies to anyone anymore; neither does the idea that no one is above the law. Is this who we’ve become? Where will it lead? Are we being groomed for much worse to come, being desensitized into a new normal, like the proverbial frog being boiled in water?

For those who will accuse me later of preaching a “political” sermon, a “partisan” sermon, this transcends politics. Our federal government, by sanctioning unwarranted lethal force, has made this a matter of faith, of basic morality and decency. This goes well beyond politics. We worship Jesus Christ, an innocent man arrested, beaten, and then put to death by the Roman state on false charges just because it wanted to, because it could, because killing him was more convenient.

Jesus was mocked too by those who tortured him, who took perverse pleasure in his suffering, arrogantly assuming they were untouchable. In their lifetimes, they probably assumed correctly. But I wonder how they fared before the great judgment seat of Christ, where all will answer for their sins.

It leaves us wondering what to do now, and what to do next? How can we possibly respond in a way that’s both effective and reflective of who we are as faithful followers of Jesus? Where do we even start? We start where we always start, with Scripture, and we’ll go to the Gospel first.

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the Temple, an important moment in their family's life. Imagine their surprise when they were accosted without warning by two elderly prophets, Simeon and Anna, whose wisdom, gleaned from long faithful lives, gave them insight. They saw how special Jesus was and shared what they saw, in word and deed, with Mary and Joseph. The words of Anna aren't recorded, just her joy. But we hear Simeon declaring, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed."

These dark words might feel inappropriate on such an auspicious occasion, but prophets influenced by the Holy Spirit tend to tell it like it is, and Simeon, even in his great joy, saw what was to be: the struggle, the sacrifice to be suffered by Jesus and his parents—"and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." And indeed, Simeon's prophecy proved true.

Many resisted Jesus's message, especially those who had the most to lose, those obsessed with domination and control. To them, Jesus was a threat because they knew that their lies would not long survive the light of his liberating truth. His message of unconditional love was a menace, and they would go and did go to great lengths to smother what he brought to give, but they failed.

They tried Jesus falsely, humiliated him publicly, told lies to undermine him, and finally killed him, but he rose again on the third day, proving that the love of God always wins. Those who oppose the truth of love, who rely on lies and cruelty and brutality, strive to induce us to abandon our principles, and they do it slyly by contriving to make us hate instead of love.

We all know the temptation. We watch the videos and read the stories. Our outrage rises rightly at the injustice, and before we know it, the consuming fire of hatred surges in our hearts. We despise the people responsible, and maybe even fantasize about vengeance, which is precisely what the hateful in our world want most from us and for us. The hateful want us to hate so that we can be miserable and puny just like them. It's also the only game they know how to play. Refusing to hate

confuses and disorients the hateful.

We must stay disciplined in Christ's unconditional love, disciplined in prayer for those who persecute us and others, disciplined in our desire for the repentance and redemption of the hateful and cruel and brutal, disciplined in our witness that there is a different way, a way of forgiveness and reconciliation given to us by Jesus, who died on a cross and rose again.

In that discipline, fueled by grace, we find strength, a strength that refuses to stay silent. Jesus didn't stay quiet. He stayed clever, but never quiet, even though his life would have been a lot easier and safer and longer if he would have just shut up. Jesus always advocated for the Kingdom, and brought it to bear against the selfish, tyrannical kingdoms of this world. If we follow him faithfully, then we too need to act and speak out, however we can, when oppressive forces seek to crush the innocent, the weak, and the truth.

Just as the Psalmist first prayed to God millennia ago, we too prayed this morning, "Happy are those people whose strength is in you! Whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way. For the Lord God is both sun and shield; he will give grace and glory. No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity." And integrity cannot be taken away, no matter how much force is brought to bear; integrity is only ever given away.

We can act and speak with Christian integrity, even as we now know that our government might malign, beat, and even kill us for nothing more than simply showing up and asking questions and speaking truth. We can act and speak because we know that Jesus is with us—not only in this sacred space, but in every time and place where we call upon him. And we know that he understands what we're going through.

That's part of the whole purpose of Incarnation, of "God with us." Hebrews is quite clear that "because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested"; "He himself shared the same things, so that through

death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

In Jesus, God walked the earth, in part to know how it feels to be human: to suffer and to be limited, frustrated, apprehensive, intimidated. That’s the quality of love God has for you and me and everyone. The cross was the pinnacle of sacrifice, yet the Incarnation involved a sacrifice too. Just being here with us entailed loss, and by being here with us, Jesus offered a model for how to show up and be present for others, how to resist temptation and evil, how to live faithfully even when it’s hard and scary.

If we fail to act and speak, then who will? It’s tempting to ignore it all and focus on day-to-day exigencies, tempting to be comforted by modest mollifying gestures, tempting to forget how power-hungry governments consistently throughout history have retreated in a crisis, only to surge back with even greater outrages once people are distracted by something else.

Our sole comfort and strength come through Christ. What the months and years to come might bring, no one knows, and things might get worse before they get better, but our hope will not waver, “because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested,” and Christ has proven through his cross and Resurrection that God’s love always wins. Amen.

FAITH IN ACTION

The Minneapolis Faith Community Is Showing How to Fight ICE

Interfaith organizers have played a substantial role in rallying Minneapolitans and aiding their most vulnerable neighbors.

Grace Segers /
January 21, 2026

The Reverend Susie Hayward felt as if she had experienced the full spectrum of human emotion over the span of a week. As the minister of justice organizing at Creekside United Church of Christ in southern Minneapolis, Hayward has been deeply involved in organizing and participating in the community response to the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

“Myself and my community are feeling our nervous systems are all dysregulated, and we are feeling fear and we’re feeling grief and we’re feeling anger. So there is all of that, as we are being terrorized in our communities,” said Hayward. But, she continued, the current moment is also characterized by “a great deal of connection and courage and, just frankly, love that is also surging through this city among folks.”

Although ICE has been present in large numbers in Minneapolis since late December, the deadly shooting of Renee Good by an ICE officer earlier this month has resulted in a surge of organizing and protests in the local community—and faith leaders are playing a key coordinating role. Minneapolis has a diverse population representing a number of different faiths, so the interfaith organizers represent a broad spectrum of religious affiliation.

Members of Hayward’s church are involved in such activities as patrolling outside schools and houses of worship to disrupt ICE activity, and assisting migrants who may be afraid to leave their homes by delivering groceries and offering rides. This has become a major priority for many in the local Minneapolis community—one Minneapolis church has delivered more than 12,000 boxes of food to families unable to leave their homes, according to [MPR News](#).

For Kelly Sherman-Conroy, an associate pastor at All Nations Indian Church in Minneapolis, ensuring that local organizers are well trained is a deeply personal endeavor. Growing up in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, Sherman-Conroy saw members of wealthy, white congregations in the Twin Cities visit her community to undertake mission projects—without actually learning about the people they were ostensibly serving.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, Sherman-Conroy helped form an interfaith network of faith leaders known as Movement Chaplains, providing training on how to effectively engage in nonviolent protesting. The emphasis of these trainings is on “deescalation and cultural awareness and sensitivity,” she said, and teaching “what it means to be a guest in the space.”

“There’s been a big call for people of faith to show up more, especially clergy,” Sherman-Conroy explained. “I’m a big proponent of saying, like, ‘Don’t send somebody out and make that invitation if you don’t give them the tools to keep themselves safe and others safe.’” Twin Cities neighborhoods with large Somali populations have been disproportionately targeted by federal agents after a right-wing influencer peddled unsubstantiated claims of fraud occurring at daycare centers operated by Somali Minnesotans.

Hayward is also active in multifaith networks that have mobilized in the wake of Good’s death. She has tried to offer pastoral care to detained migrants, although she was blocked from doing so, and participated in an event calling on Target—which is based in Minnesota—to stop allowing ICE agents to operate on its premises.

Faith leaders have also organized virtual “nightly healing spaces,” offering pastoral and therapeutic care for Minneapolis residents “after they’ve been out all day long, facing harassment and intimidation by ICE, witnessing traumatic events,” Hayward said.

Hayward has found herself in need of some of these services. She was one of the

clergy members who responded to the scene on the day of Good's death, and was pepper-sprayed by ICE when she arrived at the location. She has been shoved and insulted by ICE officers.

"I've had ICE agents ... flip me off and push me around and say harmful things to me, as they are to everybody here," Hayward said. "If they're doing this to a white clergywoman in a collar, what are they doing to my brown and Black immigrant neighbors when the videos aren't rolling?"

Nationally, the events of the past month in Minneapolis have inspired multifaith leaders to respond on a larger scale. To Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, the president and CEO of the Interfaith Alliance, the countrywide mobilization is in keeping with the history of the nation. He pointed to the abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights Movement as times when religious leaders were active in pushing for progress.

"One of the great American traditions is religious leadership showing up and helping America to see a way forward," Raushenbush said. Interfaith Alliance has hosted in-person and virtual trainings that educate people on the intersection between faith and current politics, as well as practical "essential knowledge" to help communities respond to federal law enforcement.

"How do you show up safely? How do you deescalate situations when they arrive? ... If you're going to show up on the streets, what is your spiritual reservoir that you will draw from in order to be in that moment and remain nonviolent?" Raushenbush said of the trainings. "People need training in order to make sure that they're able to be as effective and centered and organized as possible."

Sherman-Conroy said that Movement Chaplains only go where they are invited, wearing orange shirts to identify their presence. "When we go into these spaces, we don't center ourselves, right? We center our community. So for us, the idea is that community is a spiritual practice," she said.

There has been some tension in Minneapolis faith communities in recent days. On Sunday, protesters disrupted a worship service at a St. Paul church, where one of the pastors serves as the head of the local ICE field office. The Justice Department is now investigating the event. Nekima Levy Armstrong, a local civil rights activist and ordained reverend, argued in an interview with *The Washington Post* that the protest aligned with Christian principles, saying that “if you compare anyone’s actions and behaviors against that scripture, that will tell you who is on the right side of history and who is on the wrong side of history.”

Diverse communities across Minneapolis have been affected by the actions of federal law enforcement. Sherman-Conroy noted that Native Americans have been targeted by ICE officers, who arrest them on suspicion of being undocumented immigrants. The Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, which holds an ICE facility, was named after the first Episcopal bishop of Minnesota, who advocated for the rights of Dakota Indians in the nineteenth century. The Episcopal Church of Minnesota is among the organizations that want Whipple’s name removed from the building.

“Bishop Whipple himself would never have endorsed his name going on a building where so much fear and terror is manifested,” Daniel Romero, a volunteer leader of the Interfaith Coalition on Immigration and ministerial candidate with the United Church of Christ, told the *Associated Press*.

Other Christian leaders in the region have highlighted the connection between faith principles and political action. Episcopal Bishop Craig Loya said in a homily earlier this month that Christians should be inspired to “make like our ancient ancestors, and turn the world upside down by mobilizing for love.”

From Hayward’s perspective as a Christian, the level of community action is “manifesting as an embodied expression of the greatest command of all, which is to love God and love [your] neighbor.” She said she has been heartened by the community response, and the intertwining of faith and demonstration.

“I feel like I’m witnessing the great awakening of democracy here, from the ground up,” Hayward said.

Talking Points Memo

Inside the Secret Network Offering Sanctuary to Immigrants Amid Trump's ICE Onslaught



by Hunter Walker

12.09.25 | 11:04 am

They call them the “forgotten migrants.”

Of the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, over two thirds of them come from Mexico and South America, according to [data compiled by the Pew Research Center](#) last year. However, the population from other regions is growing sharply. Pew found that, as of 2022, there were 375,000 unauthorized immigrants from Africa living in the U.S., which was a striking 36% increase over three years.

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Estimates show New York is home to nearly 8% of the nation's undocumented African immigrants. The community was the primary focus of ICE's Canal Street raid in late October. As TPM spent nearly two months examining the fallout from that sweep and Trump's deportation machine in the city, we found that African migrants have faced threats and unique challenges. They're also receiving help from a growing network of activists and advocates.

At a weekly "Welcome Center" located inside the sanctuary of one New York City church, the majority of visitors are African men who hold the low-paying and dangerous food delivery jobs that are one of the only options for people without work permits in New York.

Outside, the only sign of the lifeline being offered at the church is a line of delivery bikes parked on the street. Inside, there is a vibrant, bustling scene. One corner of the room is lined with prayer mats for Muslim worship. Pews that line the side of the chapel have been turned into an impromptu barber shop where three men provide a steady stream of free shaves and fades. The center of the room is open and filled with tables offering food, assistance with court paperwork, job and house hunting, English lessons, and GED tutoring. On a second floor balcony, there is a supply of donated clothing.

One of the two lead volunteers who run the center told TPM they are a parishioner at the church, and that providing services for migrants has become their "full-time second job." They said the vast majority of people who visit the welcome center are West African men ranging from teenagers to those in their early forties. According to the volunteer, it can be difficult for these men "to navigate and just even find translations" since most services in New York are designed for migrant families and Spanish speakers.

“The people from West Africa are sometimes referred to as the forgotten migrants or the hidden migrants,” the volunteer said. “They don’t speak Spanish. They come from countries where their primary language is either Wolof or Fulani. Most of them speak French. Some of them speak Arabic as well. And the city’s not set up for them.”

The “Welcome Center” began in January 2023. In the previous months, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republican state leaders began sending busloads of undocumented migrants to New York and other cities led by Democrats to protest President Joe Biden’s immigration policies. Protections from deportation, including avenues to asylum, that were offered by the Biden administration contributed to a spike in the undocumented population, which climbed to record levels in 2022 and 2023.

After Abbott began busing migrants to the city, parishioners at the church noticed large gatherings of West African men in one of the neighborhood’s parks. The church decided to offer some services for these people who had “nowhere to go,” the volunteer said.

“They had no footwear for the winter. They were in sandals. They didn’t have coats. They didn’t have a place to stay. They didn’t have anything,” the volunteer explained.

On that first day, the volunteers distributed flyers in the park. They sat ready with food. Initially, no one showed up. However, within 15 minutes of another nearby facility closing up shop for the day, crowds began pouring through the door.

“We looked up and there were about a hundred, 120 guys outside who were starting to come in,” the volunteer said. “We were just completely overwhelmed and blown away.”

Working with some of the men who spoke English, the church began to assess their needs and expand the welcome center's offerings to include educational programs, legal services, and haircuts.

"We had no plan. We were really meeting the need. So we would figure [it] out by being in community with these guys," the volunteer said. "Being there on the margins with them is where we live."

Through their work with the migrants, the welcome center volunteers also learned about the "enormous hardship" that caused them to leave their homes and seek a new life in the U.S.

"Nobody wants to leave their country," the volunteer said.

Much of the momentum behind African migration is driven by the political instability, crushing poverty, and large number of armed conflicts that are roiling the continent. The volunteer specifically cited the situation in Guinea where people have been living under a repressive military junta since a 2021 coup d'etat.

"The young kids are fleeing terrible, terrible abuse in their home. And almost all of them have been abandoned in some way by their parents. Either through death ... but more likely their parents just leave," the volunteer said. "With the older guys, we see a lot of political persecution. The guys from Guinea, a lot of that is political as well. So, they got on the wrong side of the rebels. They got on the wrong side of the law. They were arrested. They've seen their friend shot."

Now that they have arrived in the United States, these migrants have new fears. The ICE raid on Canal Street largely targeted unlicensed African vendors who operate there. That week, attendance at the welcome center was down dramatically. Normally, about 100 people visit each week.

Along with the “heartbreaking stories of abandonment and abuse” that brought them to America, the volunteer noted many visitors to the welcome center are part of the LGBTQ community, which is often subject to intense prejudice in Africa. Both anti-gay discrimination and political persecution can be a qualifications for asylum in the United States.

“They go through this enormous hardship to stay here. And they work so hard. Like, they work harder than anybody I know to get to whatever job they can find, to figure out the system,” the volunteer said.

Given the combination of youth, political persecution, and discrimination that has driven many of the migrants to the welcome center, the court counseling offered there is heavily focused on assistance with asylum applications and the Special Immigrant Juvenile visa, or SIJ. Both of these programs can ultimately lead to lawful permanent residency.

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Asylum allows people who face certain demonstrated conditions that preclude

them from returning to their home countries, including oppression and prejudice, to obtain lawful permanent residency. SIJ offers the same to people under 21 who have been abandoned by at least one parent. While these programs have continued under Trump, applying has become trickier. And migrants seeking this relief are no longer protected from deportation during their legal proceedings. Both of these pathways to a green card can lead through the courts in Manhattan where hundreds of migrants have been taken from the halls by masked agents after showing up for their hearings and check-ins.

India Wood, an intern at the welcome center, is helping to establish a trauma-informed “collective support” group for immigrants.

“For some of these guys, I think they know that this is a safer place,” she said. “No place is safe, I think, at this juncture, but they know that they can come there and they can trust the people who are coming every week.”

Wood, a dual degree graduate student at Union Theological Seminary and Hunter Silberman School of Social Work pursuing a Master in Divinity, said she heard about the center through word of mouth. She noted that this is a moment when many are wondering where and how they can resist the Trump administration, and said she has been heartened by what she has seen with the grassroots efforts to assist migrants in New York.

“There are so many people who care so deeply about this and so many folks who kind of stumbled into it,” said Wood. “Often, I hear people being like, I don’t know how to help this situation — whatever it might be that the administration is currently fucking up in our country. ... You just have to talk to people about it and see how other people are plugging in around it. ... I’ve just been really impressed by how deep this network goes.”

The volunteer at the welcome center said they believe in a philosophy based on “radical hospitality, and our welcome, and our embrace of the community.” That means that though the facility is run by a church, the immigrants aren’t subject to any Christian proselytizing. The volunteer contrasted their approach with the brand of Christianity espoused by Trump and his MAGA movement.

“The Christian right, the Christian nationalists, they tend to focus on, like, the Old Testament or Paul. They skip right through the Gospels and Jesus,” the volunteer said. “They love Leviticus, right? But they don’t so much love when Jesus says, you know, feed the hungry, and turn the other cheek, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Wood, who is an aspiring Unitarian Universalist minister, noted the few direct commandments actually attributed to Christ centered on loving God and an order to “love everyone as your neighbor.” To her, the welcome center fits strongly with these Christian ideals.

“I think if you are a Christian who really deeply believes in the acts, and works, and life of Jesus, then you would take that really seriously and serve the people who are around you directly,” said Wood.

Much of the efforts to welcome and assist migrants underway in New York City grew out of the Sanctuary movement, which emerged in the 1980s and included over 500 churches and synagogues. That movement was based on decentralized immigrant-led assistance. It led to the establishment of legal clinics, welcome centers, and official sanctuary cities where local governments declined to cooperate with federal law enforcement. A second wave of the sanctuary

movement emerged amid rising anti-immigrant sentiment and associated policies during the mid-2000s. In Trump's second term, this brand of activism and advocacy is once again surging to the fore.

The Undocumented Underground in New York also carries clear echoes of the 19th century abolitionist movement to end slavery. Both phenomena are heavily rooted in the city's churches and synagogues. In fact, some of the same spaces that played key roles in that historical era have now sprung back into action to support migrants including Plymouth Church, whose first pastor was the famed abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher.

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— *India Wood*

Rev. Juan Carlos Ruiz is the pastor at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brooklyn. He was involved in the initial wave of sanctuary activism and later became a co-founder of the New Sanctuary Movement. In a conversation with

TPM last month, Ruiz said he came to the U.S. as an unaccompanied minor from Mexico in the 1980s. His family had been among the campesinos — seasonal workers who regularly crossed back and forth. After being devastated by hyperinflation in Mexico, Ruiz’s parents once again journeyed north. He followed them.

“I became part of this river of undocumented, people living in the shadows of a society that — it’s evident today — that clearly doesn’t want us, or deems us as disposable,” Ruiz said.

Ruiz was drawn to seminary and later the priesthood because of what he describes as “the power of faith to organize the people. For him, the church provided a platform and a way for “the common folk to really tap into ... imagination and create different worlds for themselves.”

“I fell in love with the power of the word,” he recounted.

Ruiz ultimately obtained citizenship. However, that time in the shadows defined who he is today. Ruiz said the eight years he spent looking over his shoulder for the “migra” is still “very much present” and helped cement his belief the church should be a “sanctuary space.”

“The church for me was that place, you know, that protected me — not only protected me, but in a very militant way, kind of upheld my dignity and my sense of self and my ties to a larger body,” he explained.

As a pastor, Ruiz said he has been involved with “at least a thousand” migrant cases. His work has included participating in trainings, accompanying people to court, and working with pro se legal clinics that provide migrants with assistance representing themselves in immigration court. He also explained that there is a

“corridor” of Brooklyn churches that are part of rapid response networks and are willing to open their doors in the event of an ICE raid.

Despite all of this activism and preparation, Ruiz said living through this first year of the second Trump administration has been daunting. He has seen people struggling with a combination of crushing poverty and fear of deportation. Ruiz noted the situation goes beyond Trump and said he sees it as part of a larger “violent economy” that is willing to exploit undocumented laborers.

“It’s cringingly painful, sad, and discouraging,” Ruiz said. “We see the immigration stuff as the point of the spear that is really deteriorating our democratic humanistic values, that turns people into their worst selves, and that drains resources from our communities.”

Like many of the activists and advocates who spoke to TPM over the past two months, Ruiz is also worried the situation in New York could get worse. Along with ominous proclamations from Trump’s “border czar,” those concerns are based fears the White House may lash out following democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani’s victory in the city’s mayoral election last month. Trump had a cozy, cooperative, and complicated relationship with Mamdani’s predecessor, Eric Adams. The president’s initial interactions with the new mayor have included a mix of in person friendliness and sharp political attacks on social media.

Nevertheless, as we sat at his church, Ruiz said he is keeping the faith. For him, continuing to serve the migrant community helps give him strength to keep working.

“There is a fire within us that is fed day by day as we keep practicing and developing the muscle of compassion and love,” Ruiz said as an organ played in the background. “That will pull us through.”